

The New Kid on the Block: An Argument for Video Games as Art

**An Honors Thesis (ENG 444)**

**By**

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jennifer Grouling". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned centrally on the page.

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## Abstract

Video Games have been around since the early 1970s. As decades have passed, they have grown more complex, and have also grown more popular. However, they are still typically not seen as art. Figures such as the late Roger Ebert adamantly denied any possibility for video games to ever be considered an art form. Video game scholars have researched other aspects of the medium, with some focusing on games as narratives. However, there has not been adequate research or discussion on whether or not video games qualify as art. What exacerbates the problem is that there is no definitive definition for art. In this paper, I first examine definitions of art from various scholars before settling on one from Denis Dutton that blends objectivity with subjectivity. I then take an in-depth look at Dutton's definition, before applying it to three games – *Heavy Rain*, *The Last of Us*, and *Journey* – in order to examine their candidacy as works of art.

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## Introduction

From the invention of *Pong* in 1972 to today, video games have gone through a continual maturation process. They have moved on from simply being basic, and entertaining to being more complicated, nuanced, and creative. Video games as a medium continue to progress, with new games consistently pushing the bar in terms of graphics, narrative, presentation, and new features. As a result, they have been rapidly growing in popularity for both younger and older audiences. In addition, the casual gaming market has taken off in the past decade, allowing people who are not dedicated gamers to still enjoy the medium.

Despite the increase in popularity of video games, as well as their maturation, there still seems to be a stigma surrounding games. In addition, video games still are not regarded as art by society. Mediums like film, literature, poetry, music, theater, drawing, and painting are all viewed as art forms, but video games are not. Over time, as they have progressed and become more complex, there have been certain games nominated as examples of the medium now reaching a point of being seen as art. However, many critics, such as the late Roger Ebert, have felt otherwise.

In his clearly titled opinion article, “Video Games Can Never Be Art,” Ebert argues that “...*in principle*, video games cannot be art” (Ebert). This is the result of their nature – that they have rules, objectives, points, and are winnable. Furthermore, according to Ebert, the boundary into artistic expression “...remains resolutely uncrossed” (Ebert). Ebert’s opinions summarize the reluctance that people have in categorizing any video game as art. There are comparatively less people who recognize the candidacy certain games have for being labeled as a work of art.



In the past decade, and particularly in the last few years, there have emerged a number of games that appear to qualify as works of art. However, they are games that differ in genre, gameplay, scope, length, and style. Some of these games – *Heavy Rain*, *The Last of Us*, and *Journey* – are games that are worthy of being viewed as art. Before these games are explored in depth, however, an exploration and determination of a working definition of art must take place. Still, the recent influx of high quality video games has yielded games that are worthy of being labeled as art, and as a result the future of the video game medium is looking even brighter.

### **Literature Review**

Art is a broad and abstract term that is used by people across cultures and generations. When one person says it they could mean acts of creation or expression, while a different person could be referring to the experience of certain objects and events. As a result, there is a lot of literary scholarship regarding art and what its definition could be. Robert Stecker and Catharine Abell each compiled a variety of definitions of art from past decades, in “Definition of Art” and “Art: what it is and why it matters” respectively. M. Beardsley argues “...an artwork is something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy aesthetic interest” (qtd. in Stecker 4). That is, art is produced in order to satisfy one’s desire for beauty. G. Schlesinger defines it as “an artifact which under standard conditions provides its percipient with aesthetic experience” (qtd. in Stecker 4). Aesthetic experience refers to responses, attitudes, emotions, and other reactions that one can have as a result of the beautiful features of an object. These definitions seem sound, yet they feel incomplete. Also, there is not necessarily a guaranteed intention in satisfying aesthetic interest.

R. Lind posits that art is “any creative arrangement of one or more media whose principal function is to communicate a significant object” (qtd. in Stecker 4). While some artworks certainly have the function of communicating a message or idea, that cannot be said for all artworks. A similar idea comes from Noël Carroll, who agrees with philosopher Danto’s definition of art. He explains it as follows:

X is a work of art if and only if (a) X has a subject (b) about which X projects an attitude or point of view (c) by means of rhetorical (usually metaphorical) ellipsis (d), which ellipsis requires audience participation to fill in what is missing (interpretation) (e), where both the work and the interpretation require an art-historical context (qtd. in Stecker 5).

The Aestheticism movement towards the end of the Nineteenth century pushed the idea of “art for art’s sake” – the exact opposite of Lind, Carroll, and Danto’s theses. Art can have a practical use or some sort of agenda, but it is difficult to deem it an absolute quality. However, in Danto’s definition, the focus on audience interpretation seems to be a valid point because art should elicit some sort of response or reaction.

Stecker himself suggests the possibility that “...there can be several equally useful definitions of art, several equally good solutions to the same problem” (Stecker 8). In a way, this is suggesting the futility of trying to find a singular definition of art, which other critics also stress. However, there must a definition for art – otherwise nothing would be art because there would be no firm standard to measure potential candidates up against.

In her exploration of various art definitions, Abell explains that functionalists “...typically hold that the value of art consists in its performance of the function in terms

of which they define art” (672). Another critic, Jerrold Levinson, argues that “...something is an artwork if it is intended to be regarded in at least some way in which artworks of the past were correctly or standardly regarded” (qtd. in Abell 674). A call for a look at artworks from history is another fair argument, though it again has limitations. Some artworks might be groundbreaking and force audiences to look at them in new and unique ways. Also, if history is the judge of what art is, then there would have been a point in the past where there was no art, because there were not artworks to look back on.

Just as “one cannot perform the act of marrying unless one is a priest or a celebrant...Stephen Davies assumes...there is some act whose successful performance enables those with the requisite authority to make something a work of art (qtd. in Abell 676). Similarly, George Dickie argues that “...art making is an essentially institutional activity, such that whether or not something is art depends on whether or not members of the institution of art deem it art, or are prepared to accept it as art” (qtd. in Abell 674). Both definitions call for certain individuals to have the authority to label certain things art. While it is logical to have educated individuals involved in the decision process, it would be odd to have only a certain amount of people allowed to give their input. Therefore, a broader and more accessible definition should be sought after.

At the end of her article, Abell shares her own institutional definition of art at the end of her article: “Something is an artwork if it is the product of an art institution, and it directly affects how effectively that institution performs the perceived functions to which its existence is due” (Abell 686). According to this definition, a work of art like a film or CD would have to push or inspire the film/music industry to improve. It certainly would make sense for significant artworks to push their respective industries/institutions – that

is the nature of competition. However, that would appear to make the standards quite strict and narrow. Some paintings, films, and songs that are considered art – such as Duchamp’s *Fountain* - would potentially fail to meet the requirements if Abell’s definition was widely accepted.

In truth, one hundred people could be interviewed and there would still be no clear consensus on how to define art. It is this dilemma that Denis Dutton addresses in his article “A Naturalist Definition of Art.” He acknowledges one of the central problems to defining it, that “as art forms and techniques change and develop, as artistic interests blossom or decline, so theory, too, tags along, altering its focus, shifting its values” (Dutton). As time passes, society’s view of art changes and adapts, and within society, each person has their own perception and definition of art. The subjective nature of the topic, Dutton concedes, provides definitions that “...often fail when applied to a broader range of art.”

It would appear that a definition of art is destined to remain out of reach. However, what Dutton suggests is that one should look at art’s “recognition criteria” (Dutton 368). These criteria, he argues, are evident in all artworks. What seems more likely than a singular, ultimate definition of art is instead a checklist of sorts that any work of art in any medium must meet if it is to indeed to be labeled as art. This list of criteria encompasses, to an extent, many of the views that Abell and Stecker address in their articles. Due to its comprehensive and relatively objective nature, Dutton’s definition of art stands out as the strongest and one that can be most effectively used to judge potential artworks.

### **Recognition Criteria**

Dutton's twelve art recognition criteria, while not exhaustive, are an effective foundation to recognizing and defining art. A further way of understanding his criteria, however, would be to group eleven of them into three different categories. One category, audience reaction, includes direct pleasure, emotion, intellectual challenge, criticism, and "special" focus. These criteria are all different ways that audiences can interact or react with art. Some are during a viewing, while others are after, but all of them involve the audience in some capacity. Another category, artist faculties, includes skill, style, creativity, and expressive individuality. These relate specifically to the artist creating the piece – they are the elements they have at their disposal to create. Lastly, Contextual Relationships features representation and art traditions and institutions. These are ways, whether in the present reality or in the past, that art interacts and relates to a society or the world. Imaginative experience, however, is on its own because it contains elements of both audience reaction and artist faculties.

### *Audience Reaction*

*Direct pleasure* is the fact that "the art object – narrative story, crafted artifact, or visual and aural performance—is valued as a source of immediate experiential pleasure in itself, and not primarily for its utility in producing something else that is either useful or pleasurable" (Dutton 369). This statement acknowledges the fact that art is enjoyed not because of any practical purpose, but because of the inherent and immediate joy and pleasure it brings. For example, one could enjoy listening to a classical music CD to help them focus while working. The chief value that is placed on that CD is not the fact that it can help bring a focus for work, but that it is enjoyable to listen to. As Dutton notes, "...the enjoyment of artistic beauty often derives from multilayered yet distinguishable

pleasures that are experienced either simultaneously or in close proximity to each other” (Dutton 369).

An additional component of art is the *emotion* it contains. Emotion can be found in varying degrees in art. However, by its nature art seems to be tethered to emotion. In his article Dutton proposes that the content of art produces emotion. For example, a comical scene from a play or film, a poem that has a strong appeal to pathos, and a tense and an exciting passage in a novel all evoke some sort of emotion from the audience.

Furthermore, art presents an *intellectual challenge* to its audience. Art is full of complexities, with the greater works typically using them to stretch the audience’s thinking as they try to understand them. For the audience,

The full exercise of mental capacities is in itself a source of aesthetic pleasure.

This includes working through a complex plot, putting evidence together to recognize a problem or solution before a character in a story recognizes it, balancing and combining formal and illustrative elements in a complicated painting, following the transformations of an opening melody recapitulated at the end of a piece of music (Dutton 372).

Like the Chinese philosophy of yin and yang, art has an opposing and eternal relationship with *criticism*. No matter what the artistic medium is, there are always critics to give their opinions. While the complexity of criticism does vary across cultures and regions, there still is criticism attached to forms that are so complex to judge. As Dutton points out, it is not the same as a hundred-meter dash, where the winner is simply the one with the fastest time (370).

Furthermore, art also is set apart from ordinary life – it is given a *special focus*.

Concerts are typically performed in extravagant auditoriums, while pieces of art are placed in impressive galleries. However, the presentation is not the only way for art to evoke a feeling of specialness. Dutton asserts that “...all cultures know and appreciate special, ‘foregrounded’ art” (Dutton 371). That is, art that by its very nature demands attention and focus. This could be the extravagance of a theater production or even an engrossing novel. Simply put, art takes hold of the audience’s attention.

### *Artist Faculties*

The second recognition category, artist faculties, contains *skill* or virtuosity. This refers to the reality that the artwork, whether an object or performance, requires and demonstrates some degree of a specialized skill (Dutton 369). There can be varying levels of skill, but it is clear that some sort of skill is present in art. From the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to cave paintings in France, there is an impressive display of skill, despite the differences between the artworks. Even a painting or song created by a middle school student features skill, it just is to a much different degree. The skill present in art brings about a sense of admiration, respect, and emotion in the audience. However, there is also the possibility of an emotional appreciation - the art might cause “...jaws to drop, hair to stand up on the back of the neck, and eyes to flood with tears” (Dutton 369). There is skill present in true works of art, regardless of whether or not the reaction is emotional or intellectual.

*Styles* can come across as rigid restrictions that hinder artists’ ability to create.

However, it is actually a reference point for artists and the audience. It provides a “...stable, predictable, ‘normal’ background against which artists may create elements of

novelty and expressive surprise” (Dutton 370). Style also provides a familiar background for audiences to frame their expectations and reactions to. Admittedly, styles can oppress and constrain artists, but more often they can liberate and free their creativity and expression. In fact, it is thanks to styles that artists such as Salvador Dali or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart were able to become so famous. Dali mastered the basic styles of art and creatively played with them to defy expectations. Mozart, on the other hand, did not stray from styles but instead pushed them, creating masterpieces that pushed the expectations of accepted styles and sub-genres.

A key feature of art is its *novelty and creativity*. Dutton defines creativity as “...both the attention-grabbing function of art (a major component of its entertainment value) and the artist’s perhaps less jolting capacity to explore the deeper possibilities of a medium or theme” (Dutton 370). Regardless of the medium – whether in dance, art, music, film, theater, or writing – there is no art without creativity, for it is through creativity that the artist may express his or her individuality and genius in a way that is not governed by rules. They are able to create – to make something that is a part of them.

Another of the recognition criteria is the *expressive individuality* found in art. He writes, “the potential to express individual personality is generally latent in art practices, regardless of whether it is fully achieved” (Dutton 371). There are certain activities, like proofreading, running a CAT scan, or transcribing a speech, that do not allow much room for individual expression. However, the open-ended nature of the arts certainly allows and demands some form of individual expression, though the degree of it can vary. Art provides the means for a person to express their thoughts, feelings, memories, or other



personal aspects of their lives. This can be more explicit and developed, or it could be more open to interpretation.

### *Imaginative Experience*

According to Dutton, the most important characteristic of art is arguably that “...objects of art essentially provide an *imaginative experience* for both producers and audiences” (372). Regardless of whether the work of art is realistic, it invites the audience to exercise their imaginative faculties in order to enjoy and experience it. For the artist, there is the imaginative creative process of making a work of art. This criteria falls under each of the previous categories. For one, it is involved in the audience’s reaction to a work of art – depending on what it is, they might imagine things the backstory or the continuation of the artwork. Imagination is also clearly an artist faculty - without the imagination there would not be art.

### *Contextual Relationships*

An additional key recognition feature of art is its *historical and traditional significance*. Art forms follow precedents of art in a way that give them a sort of identity. For example, a painting does not exist in a vacuum – it is a part of a greater history of paintings that lend it significance and other pieces to relate to it. Also, knowing historical background of a medium lends additional insight and context to the piece currently being appreciated and analyzed.

Art also “...represents or imitates real and imaginary experiences of the world” (Dutton 371). This *direct representation* typically appeals to audiences as well as artists. Still life and portrait paintings and drawings are among many of the artworks found in museums, while films that stray toward realism are generally critically lauded. Not every

artwork ever made is necessarily realistic – for example, *Star Wars* and other science fiction films and novels do not draw from modern day technology. However, what all art – even music – has is the essence of something from real life. In genres like science fiction there are characters who struggle with internal problems that the audience can relate to. Also, in music there are pieces that evoke the joy and energy of the spring season and the dreariness of winter.

### **Video Game Scholarship**

Video games themselves have been around for a number of decades. As a result, there are scholars and critics who research and study different aspects of video games. In the continually growing field of video game scholarship, one of the biggest debates seems to rest between the Ludologists and Narratologists. Ludologists, according to Marie-Laure Ryan, prefer to “...study games (videogames in particular) as unique artifacts...These scholars resist subsuming games under forms of literature and using means of analysis originally designed for the study of literary narrative to look at games” (qtd. in Grouling ch. 4). They want to look at video games in a new light instead of studying them like other mediums are studied because games are so new and different in comparison.

On the other hand, Narratologists are in favor of analyzing video games with a storytelling focus. They want to study video games in a similar way that films and pieces of literature are studied – with a focus on the narrative elements present in games. This study of video games’ narratives could be extended to be a study of games’ art credentials in the future. This would be a natural transition considering that games do not

currently have much scholarship on whether they are art, and because the mediums that Narratologists want their study of games to resemble are already considered art forms.

In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee, a renowned video game scholar, discusses the learning principles acquired from video games. After discussing the transcript of an interview with a 12-year old, Gee argues that kids “...are experiencing a much more powerful view of learning when they are playing video games, an enterprise that many in our culture think is a ‘waste of time,’ than they are in school” (211). This sheds a more positive light on the continued growth in popularity of video games in society, particularly among younger kids. The learning principles that Gee feels are found in good video games are: the distributed principle, the dispersed principle, the affinity group principle, and the insider principle (211-212). Gee recognizes a practical value in video games, something that makes them more than just entertaining toys. This seems to clash with Dutton’s recognition of *direct pleasure* because there is practical value, but Gee is not arguing that games do not provide pure entertainment. Instead, he is noting that games also provide practical benefits, which, if video games are in fact learning tools, coincides with Dutton’s criteria of *intellectual challenge*.

While there is video game scholarship on multiple pressing and interesting topics, there is not much that has to do with whether video games are art. As a result, I desire to argue the valid candidacy of *Heavy Rain*, *The Last of Us*, and *Journey* as works of art. I found Dutton’s definition of art – that is, his twelve recognition criteria – as the most clear and effective definition to work with because of its checklist nature. His definition combines subjectivity and objectivity in a way that other art definitions do not. While

there is no true objective definition of art, a supremely subjective topic, Dutton's checklist at least gives an objective structure to a subjective process. Therefore, I will compare each of these three games against Dutton's definition in order to justify being labeled as works of art.

## **Video Games Analysis**

### *Heavy Rain*

*Heavy Rain* is a Playstation 3 game that diverges from most typical games. It is an interactive drama about the Origami Killer – a serial killer who kidnaps boys and drowns them in rain water, leaving origami pieces with them. The game puts players in the shoes of four main characters connected in their pursuit of the Origami Killer: Ethan Mars, a father searching for his kidnapped son; Scott Shelby, a private detective hired to investigate the Origami Killer's murders; Norman Jayden, an FBI agent sent to help the police save the kidnapped Shaun Mars; and Madison Paige, a reporter who is interested in covering the Origami Killer story. The game is unique in its presentation – the game can go in many different directions, including the death of the major characters, depending on the player's choices. *Heavy Rain* is a video game that is deserving of being classified as art.

One of the recognition criteria that *Heavy Rain* definitely satisfies is that of *direct pleasure*. It is a game that is exhilarating, emotionally engaging, and ultimately enjoyable to play, or even watch. There is no major practical benefit to the game – it is simply an experience that one can have and enjoy. *Heavy Rain* is also a game bursting with *emotion*. It elicits emotion through many key scenes involving its characters, with many of them scenes where the player has to guide the character out of particular trials. For

example, there is one sequence where you have five minutes of real time to make one of the characters cut off part of their finger. In another, you have to make a character move slowly and carefully in order to attempt to subdue a shoplifter. Both are scenes full of tension and exhilaration. The game's wonderful soundtrack also plays a large role in building the emotion of particular scenes, such as during a key flashback later in the game. At different points throughout the game, I felt joy, pain, fear, anguish, and surprise, among other emotions.

In addition, *Heavy Rain* had a large amount of *critics* evaluating it. On the review aggregator site *Metacritic.com*, *Heavy Rain* scored 87 out of 100 after 107 critic reviews ("Heavy Rain"). Well acclaimed website *Gamespot* gave it an 8.5/10, noting that it is "a profoundly personal experience that should not be missed" (Anderson). *IGN*, a popular media site, gave it a 9.0/10, calling it "a hell of an experience..." and saying that "...the character development, dialog and story twists will hook you like few games can" (Roper). The game is also a clear demonstration of *skill* in storytelling, visual design and production, graphics, art direction, musical scoring, and voice acting, among other areas. It is made by Quantic Dreams and directed by David Cage, who has over a decade's worth of experience in the games industry. He is known for combining cinematic and game elements, and his stories are typically imbued with suspense and mystery. He has a vision for the style of game he wants to create and sticks with it, despite its unorthodoxy in the video game genre. *Heavy Rain* bears his signature style, meeting Dutton's recognition criteria of *expressive individuality*.

Admittedly, *Heavy Rain* features a relatively unique *style* for a video game. Its control scheme is nontraditional, with movement and camera control mapped to

uncommon buttons. Actions are also performed with the right stick and a combination of buttons that, while intuitive, is a far cry from the standard, basic control schemes of most games. However, its inclusion of quick time events, where a player is forced to quickly react to button prompts, is a common feature of many games. In addition, its noir-like mystery story is made in a style similar to novels and films of that genre. While *Heavy Rain* does resemble other stories that have come before, it certainly is a game that is brimming with *novelty and creativity*. Its unique narrative-driven gameplay, along with its emphasis on player choice and consequence, pushes the boundaries of what the industry considers a story-centered game. Its many outcomes are creative, as is its control scheme, which brings a novel sense of exhilaration and dread as well as satisfaction and accomplishment as the player progresses through the game.

The focus on realism in *Heavy Rain* satisfies another of Dutton's recognition criteria: *representation*. While the character models have visual limitations that make them clearly a part of a video game, the art direction and graphics combined with motion capture create a visual experience that represents real life and real people. The struggles of the characters along with the look and feel of the in-game world also combine to make for a strong representation of reality. With the press of a button, players have access to the characters' inner thoughts, often displaying emotions such as fear, confusion, anger, joy, or curiosity, among others. Unlike many other games, *Heavy Rain*'s characters are not superhuman. For example, each of the four main characters has a medical problem of some sort, such as insomnia or asthma. Also, if a character is injured, such as when Scott gets into a fight early in the game, he walks away sore, not instantly healed or unscathed.

Despite its realism, *Heavy Rain* has a “*special*” *focus*, as Dutton put it. The game does feature relatively life-like characters in a modern setting. However, it is a dramatized representation of reality – full of heightened choices and experiences that set it apart from real life. In its realism, *Heavy Rain* continues the *tradition* of video games striving for a more realistic presentation, particularly the tradition established by previous Mature rated (ages 17 and up) games. It could be said that *Heavy Rain* set a new precedent for games striving for realism, especially given the fact that it is now three years old.

*Intellectual challenge* is evident throughout *Heavy Rain*. The quick time events throughout the game require quick-thinking and precision. Also, the player is forced to make choices – choices that are dependent on their thinking. When Scott and a friend are placed in a compromising position, the player has to have Scott wipe everything they touched with a cloth – it is up to the player to figure out how many things to clean before leaving. There are consequences depending on how much the player remembers to clean, and it is one of many situations that stretch the player’s thinking. Aside from the gameplay, the narrative itself is very intellectually stimulating. It is a well-crafted serial killer mystery with plenty of twists and turns that did not feel forced.

Lastly, *Heavy Rain* is absolutely an *imaginative experience*. David Cage and the team at Quantic Dream put a lot of creativity and effort into the game, crafting an experience that is just about unparalleled in the games industry (or film industry, for that matter). In turn this allows the player to engage in an imaginative experience too, investing in four characters in a way that is unique, tense, and exciting. Players can get under the skin of characters and feel like they have a say in what goes on in the game

world. The game offers this experience to players without the obtrusiveness of a game over screen – players are simply invited to immerse themselves in the world of the game.

Through its compelling narrative, realism, strong characters, and other features, *Heavy Rain* meets Dutton's criteria and qualifies as a work of art. It feels like a combination of a film and a video game that, along with its affecting musical soundtrack, results in a watershed game for the industry, as well as an admirable piece of art.

### *The Last of Us*

In the past five or so years, apocalyptic stories have become a big part of popular culture, particularly zombie stories. *World War Z* has become a successful novel and film. With the public potentially worn out from over saturation of zombie lore, video game studio Naughty Dog released *The Last of Us*, a game about a man (Joel) who is tasked with bringing a young girl (Ellie) across an infected, post-apocalyptic America. *The Last of Us* released to critical acclaim and financial success. In addition, the game fits Dutton's definition of art.

As I played *The Last of Us*, it was clear to me that it was a game made with a great amount of *skill*. Naughty Dog is renowned in the gaming industry for its creation of the *Crash Bandicoot* trilogy on Playstation 1, the *Jak and Daxter* trilogy on the Playstation 2, and especially for the critically acclaimed *Uncharted* series on Playstation 3. The studio is definitely experienced in making games with solid mechanics, good characters, and excellent graphics. *The Last of Us*, in my opinion, has these same qualities but ultimately eclipses all of their previous efforts.

In terms of the narrative, which certainly is reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* - a highly regarded work of art in literature - Naughty Dog successfully keeps



in line with *traditions* of the apocalyptic story, such as infected creatures, twisted humans, and wild card characters. However, they also successfully imbue the story and genre with some of their own *individuality*, *creativity*, and *style*. Ellie is a 14 year old girl who has been born into apocalyptic America. As a result, she has a survivor's mentality. She is foul-mouthed and is willing to kill in order to survive – in fact, it is what is normal to her. Throughout the game, she asks questions to Joel and other characters about what the world used to be like. Making the co-protagonist a girl is a novel take on the apocalyptic genre, particularly given the fact that she is a 14 year old who is wise and hardened beyond her years.

The game also features creative locations for a game, ranging from a university campus to an abandoned suburban neighborhood. In addition, *The Last of Us* has an intuitive pacing method: seasons. Time jumps forward by seasons, allowing for the game to skip from location to location across America without making the player travel the distance. In addition, there is an extended sequence where the player is able to play as Ellie. This is unusual for games in this genre – typically you play as one character for the duration of the game.

Naughty Dog made both Ellie and Joel characters who have hard emotional shells protecting their vulnerabilities and brokenness. The studio kept up its knack for creating strong supporting characters too, with multiple characters seen along the course of the game given solid development and depth. There are comical and touching moments throughout the game as well, which are elements Naughty Dog typically puts in its games. In addition to its story, *The Last of Us* also adheres to the *traditions* of third person shooters and survival horror games from the past. Similar to *Dead Space*, a space

horror game, the player has to heal and manage their inventory in real time. During gunfights, there is a cover system, which was made popular in *Gears of War* and used in a variety of games since. These elements, along with others, like weapon upgrades, keep *The Last of Us* rooted in its gaming genre while enabling it to also take some creative liberties. *The Last of Us* displays novelty, style, skill, individuality, and also adheres to traditions of its narrative and game genre.

Furthermore, *The Last of Us* meets Dutton's recognition criteria of *direct pleasure* and *representation*. The game is engaging, surprising, and simply put a lot of fun to play. It has some interesting themes and elements that can be taken away from it, but the game is simply a thrilling and enjoyable experience. Moments where you have to use stealth to sneak through areas with enemies looking for you are tense and exhilarating. Another mechanic of the game, scrounging for materials, ammunition, and supplies, yields enjoyable feelings of relief. Like in many stories from other mediums, being able to see the main characters get through dangerous and trying situations is rewarding and cathartic.

In addition, *The Last of Us* also does a nice job of representing reality – or at least what reality could feasibly look like after an infection hits the country. While the story is fictional, the character models, voice acting, character development, environment, and graphics give the game a realistic feel. Houses, college campuses, school gymnasiums, and other buildings and areas found in the world today are represented with a striking realism that makes the events of the game more powerful. The visual design of the character models, while clearly from a video game, look human. The characters themselves all have flaws, desires, fears, and other key emotions - such as loss, fear,

anger, and joy - that are at times brushed aside in other games. In addition, the way that characters grimace, stagger, breathe heavily, and react to different situations comes across as relatively realistic and authentic.

While the game does feature some realism, it still is engaging and entertaining enough to draw the attention and *focus* of its players. It is an engrossing game that – through elements of horror, suspense, drama, and beauty, demands attention. This is much like the artworks that Dutton describe, works that make “...a separate and dramatic focus of experience” (Dutton 371). Moreover, *The Last of Us* received almost unanimous positive reviews when it released in June 2013. It has an overall score of 95 on *Metacritic* after 98 *critic* reviews (“The Last of Us”). The game did so well that it was even complimented by prominent Microsoft developer Larry Hyrb, who tweeted congratulations to Sony and Naughty Dog after the game’s release (Moriarty).

*Emotion* courses throughout the narrative of *The Last of Us*. The development of the characters, even ones who are in the game for a short amount of time, is effective at making their betrayals, deaths, acts brutality, and acts of kindness more significant than they would have been. There are multiple characters who die in circumstances that significantly appeal to pathos. When a character hides the fact that he was bit by an infected creature, I felt a rush of anxiety and sorrow about his inevitable demise – not to mention the repercussions on the other characters involved. Furthermore, the development of Joel and Ellie’s relationship adds to the emotion. Joel’s relationship with Ellie progresses from reluctant protector to determined father-figure. It evokes feelings of frustration, sorrow, and happiness, among other emotions, over the course of the game.

Finally, *The Last of Us* is a game that provides an *intellectual challenge* and *imaginative experience* for the player. There are many situations in the game where you are outnumbered by infected creatures or by human soldiers. As a result, you are challenged to think your way through each encounter. You could use cover to move past enemies, avoiding a fight altogether. Alternatively, you could use stealth takedowns to quietly reduce the size of the enemy's force, or even engage in a firefight with the arsenal of weapons provided in the game. The variety of situations, weapons, and, ultimately, choices, provides the player with an intellectual challenge in order to get through the game. *The Last of Us* also provides a meaningful imaginative experience. For one, the ending, which is unexpected, unusual, and complex, immediately encourages discussion and thought, both of how and why it happened as well as what the potential fallout of it could be. Challenges brought up in the game, such as the combat situations, encourage imagination and strategy in order to move past them. Given that the game is set in a post-apocalyptic world, Naughty Dog clearly put its team's collective imaginations to work, creating characters and a setting that can feel real while being fictionalized at the same time.

*The Last of Us* is impressive in its narrative and character strength, its tight gameplay, and strong and realistic graphics, among many other positive features. It is a game that, after completing, I immediately thought of as a work of art, just as I would after finishing a quality book or film. After comparing the game to Dutton's criteria, it is evident that *The Last of Us* indeed can be labeled as art.

*Journey*

Of all the companies in the video game industry, Thatgamecompany (TGC) is the one that most would put suggest strives to put out games that double as works of art. Its first two games, *Flow* and *Flower*, were acclaimed for their artistic direction, simplicity, beauty, and emotion. However, their latest game, *Journey*, is regarded as the studio's masterpiece, and it is also a game that is commonly suggested as a work of art.

The game features a silent traveler who desires to travel to the top of a distant mountain. There is no text or voiceover – the game simply begins. The traveler treks across deserts, through caverns, and up snowy mountains, among other locales, throughout the short game. An entire play through takes a little over two hours, which is quite short compared to most console games. However, it makes for a unique experience. The game has a “*special*” *focus*, as Dutton describes. It is meant to be played in one sitting, drawing the player's focus for the entire two or so hours. *Journey* also gives *direct pleasure* to the player. Its visuals are vibrant and artistic, with its musical score complementing it in addition to being emotionally affecting. There is no practical benefit from the game, but instead a multi-layered aesthetic enjoyment. The *emotion* of the narrative has a cathartic quality to it. As the traveler inched closer to the goal, with a fellow traveler at its side (via randomized online matchmaking), I felt a strong attachment to it, hoping for the journey to be successful. Eventually, the traveler succeeded, and the staging of the scene brought a sense of relief in addition to a huge, unexpected emotional payoff. In just two hours, *Journey* is able to generate a powerful and moving emotional response.

Moreover, the game is full of *style* and *creativity*. TGC's style, after three games, is one that prizes emotional connection and artistic expression, and, importantly,

innovation and boldness. In an article for the *New Yorker*, Laura Parker interviewed Jenova Chen, the creative director of the studio. Chen “...believes that TGC is ‘the Pixar of games’...” A big part of the games industry still hasn’t figured out how to give players something new. That’s what I want to do” (Parker). *Journey*’s conceit – of making the player play as an anonymous figure while being paired randomly with an anonymous online player, is a novel idea that succeeds. In addition, the game’s minimalist approach to game mechanics, explicit tutorials, and exposition are also innovative and successful. TGC developed the game with a lot of creativity as well as its *individuality*. Themes of beauty, nature, companionship, restoration, and rebirth were in *Flower*, and they are also present in *Journey*.

In addition, there was a lot of *skill* involved in making the game. Everything in *Journey* has a feeling of polish to it. The traditions of TGC are definitely seen in *Journey* – particularly the top-notch visuals, intuitive and creative controls, minimalist design, and themes. However, the game also follows a *tradition* of smaller, independent, or ‘indie,’ studio games. *Braid*, *Fez*, and other games made by small studios (or even just a couple of developers), were games that innovated while remaining on a smaller scale and budget. *Journey* definitely follows in the footsteps of other indie games.

While *Journey* is not overly complicated, it does provide an *intellectual challenge* at times. There are various puzzles that you have to complete throughout the quest, as well as complicated situations where you need to move quickly and make the right decision. The game does not feature a visual *representation* in the characters – but the landscapes resemble those of real life, while the idea of a quest full of trials is one that appeals to many people. *Journey* also represents emotions like determination, fatigue,

joy, sorrow, and despair. Overall, the game provides an immensely *imaginative experience*. Clearly TGC used its imagination and creativity while designing the game. For the player, the themes and emotions the game presents allow for an extended imagination – the player can attach personal meaning to the game. Also, its fantastical nature is an imaginative experience in and of itself.

Lastly, *Journey* was certainly reviewed by *critics*. It was adored by most critics, receiving a 92 on *Metacritic* after 78 reviews (“Journey”). In her article, Parker notes that:

Meanwhile, critics pointed to *Journey* as evidence of a cultural shift in gaming—the start of a new era of thought-provoking, meaningful experiences that stretch the boundaries of the medium. This year, *Journey* was nominated for almost every recognizable game-of-the-year award, eclipsing games with many times its budget. Overnight, TGC became the gaming industry’s new heroes.

Even for being a short, indie game, *Journey* had a large amount of critics review it, and it even won popular gaming site *IGN*’s game of the year award.

*Journey* is perhaps one of the best examples of a video game that warrants being labeled as art. It is visually stunning like a painting, as moving as most silent films, and also has a stirring musical soundtrack, among other qualities. Furthermore, it meets Dutton’s definition, so it should be labeled as art.

## Conclusion

Video games still have a long way to go before they are looked at in the same way as paintings, films, and other established art forms. However, by applying Dutton’s recognition criteria for art – arguably one of the more clear and objective definitions out

there – to *Heavy Rain*, *The Last of Us*, and *Journey*, it is clear that there are games out right now that are changing the trend. It is important to note that not all video games could be called art. Further research into what makes a game not a work of art would be valuable. On the whole, scholarship containing new, progressive definitions of art is needed in order to encompass older forms of art as well as newer mediums like video games. Furthermore, since video games have been around for a number of decades, an examination should be done of video games as a whole, recognizing video games from past and present that can be categorized as a work of art.

At this time, there are a vast amount of art definitions from different critics and sources. However, as video games begin to be seen as an art form, the various definitions of art that are postulated must shift in order to accommodate the medium, just as Dutton's does. Also, since video games can be applied to Dutton's definition and justifiably labeled as art, it seems that regardless of the lack of a singular definition, video games can in fact be art. Therefore, as more games like *Heavy Rain*, *The Last of Us*, and *Journey* are developed, it is only a matter of time before video games are consistently, if not unanimously, referred to as an art form.



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